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CERAMICS

Online Ceramics, Elijah Funk (EF) & Alix Ross (AR)

Online Ceramics have built a bootleg T-shirt empire upon a love and fascination with the Grateful Dead. Branching out from Deadhead designs, the brand has since collaborated with A24 and the Fela Kuti estate to make merch that feels at once contemporary and archival. In their complex designs, the duo scatter in obscure symbols and messages that speak to only the most niche of fan communities. Their efforts are not meant as gate-keeping, but rather as a means to celebrate fandom, community, and obsession. Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

> BS: Your practice feels very much related to bootleg culture—DIY T-shirts, proximity to music, a certain lo-fi aesthetic—yet your designs for the most part are entirely original. Is an Online Ceramics shirt a bootleg?

EF: In some ways I don't consider what we do as bootlegging. I think initially some of it was rooted in borrowing graphics from the Grateful Dead and similar concepts. Before Online Ceramics, I was making more straightforward bootlegs. I feel like we've just expanded upon bootlegging into some-

thing more similar to fan art. To me, a more traditional bootleg is more like taking an obscure record cover and printing it on a shirt, or like the vendors outside the Los Angeles Forum who are selling shirts on the street, which is something more functional than creative. Really it just feels like an effect of capitalism.

AR: Not to say that bootlegging can't be creative, but for sure, I agree with where Elijah is on that. When I think of bootlegging, I think of some of Elijah's work outside of Online Ceramics. Using extremely rare images or symbols that exist on T-shirts, yet as a way of tapping into a niche community. And that niche element is really important—that moment when one person sees it and immediately identifies with it is powerful.

EF: Right, like on this last T-shirt drop we did, I made a shirt that said Channel 23, which is the Grateful Dead's Sirius XM radio station. It isn't a bootleg, but it is referring to something in the canon. It's like the brand Boot Boyz Biz, even though their brand is explicitly about bootlegging, I see it as something a bit more dynamic because of the design decisions they are making.

> BS: So for you, a bootleg involves a certain amount of copying and pasting. It's more about shifting context while keeping the content or design the same?

pp. 373–374: Online Ceramics shirt modeled by Clue
Photo: Justin Cole Smith

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AR: Visually, I think the emphasis is more on collaging or repurposing. There is also the aspect of the vendors outside venues who don't care about communicating anything visually, and it revolves more around making money.

EF: On that note, this really funny thing happened last year at the L.A. Dead shows, where those guys bootlegged our designs and mixed it with the official artwork from the tour, because they just assumed that it *was* the official work. It was such a cool moment to me where everything had come full circle.

> BS: I'm also interested, and perhaps skeptical, when these lines become blurred between official and bootleg. I'm thinking here of these sanctioned bootlegs by companies like Off-White, Vetements, or Balenciaga.

AR: In my mind, for it to be a proper bootleg, it has to be unsanctioned.

EF: I think part of the reason we took off so early is because we were skirting so many copyright rules. It allowed us to appeal to people outside of the Grateful Dead world because it wasn't just a Grateful Dead T-shirt. Even within the Dead world, it was referencing things that were deep parts of the culture in general. The shirts became markers of knowledge that gravitated towards something like a method of research.

> BS: The Dead community feels like a central tenant to Online Ceramics. Could you talk more about this relationship between niche communities and bootlegging?

AR: For me it becomes a way to contribute something back to the community, which seems to be the goal of everyone on Shakedown Street [makeshift markets outside of Grateful Dead concerts] in some way. Obviously, there's money involved with all of this but we are trying to genuinely give something back.

EF: And really, we initially started all of this as a bartering token to be accepted into the Grateful Dead community. When guys like us roll up to a dead show—like, I don't have long hair, we're young, everything felt really foreign. We were unsure of how we would be able to communicate in this world, and these shirts became our means of communication. We have seen it sort of explode, such as big brands now making Dead shirts, all of which we don't really care for. We began to question if we should stop, but in talking to the community, they really pushed us to keep going. I see it as providing a service to people, to bring them happiness and things that they enjoy. So it's a way of marketing or transmitting joy.

> BS: How important is authorship to you? I ask this knowing that your style has been ripped off by both fans and brands. Does it bother you, or do you see it as a part of this current environment where the boundaries of ownership have become obscured?

EF: When I see younger kids doing it, it really means a lot to me because it means that they're informed, in the same way that we were, by art. I see them as learning in the same way that we did. What I don't like is when I see people finding a way to capitalize on peo-

ple's sincere feelings, and I think that's where I draw the line. There have been certain people that I've seen ripping us off and I have approached them. I just find it to be a weird way to operate in the world. But with that being said, we wouldn't exist without making Grateful Dead shirts to begin with. So in what sense are we benefiting from people being generous to us?

> BS: Right, but I've always seen bootlegging as a bottom up tactic, one where someone with less power is taking from someone with more.

EF: Anytime there's a new wave of music or something, then someone from the top comes down and squelches the thing, you know, they kill the party as they try to insert themselves into youth culture. But if we can inspire people to make artwork, then that's great. There's certainly a significant amount of younger kids making T-shirts in an alternative style that was not really prevalent when we started. I think that's really cool.

AR: Now that we have some distance from the project—it's been five years since we started—I do see it as reaffirming when people are imitating us. I really do think we turned on a light in a room that people really didn't know was there. It feels like something to continue to build on.

> BS: In what ways do you think of the T-shirt as a medium? Some of your T-shirts, with repeating motifs, can at times feel like a sequel or a second volume. Can a T-shirt be a book, a performance, a film?

EF: T-shirts were the only way people would pay attention to what we were doing. I think that is something that excites people, the fact that we have done sequels of shirts and we have expanded upon our own ideas in our world.

AR: I see wearing a T-shirt as essentially performative; a graphic T-shirt is, no matter what, making a statement. It's a political act. We're interested in creating shirts with messages that people would want to transmit.

> BS: That feels important. There really feels like a genuine connection between the two of you and the Online Ceramics ethos. I say this at a time where new age spirituality has become a bit of a trend and in many cases can feel shallow or reduced to a certain aesthetic. As two people who believe in the messaging of your shirts, does it bother you if people wear them without connecting to what they are saying?

AR: I feel like when people buy a shirt from us, they are genuinely drawn to the message.

EF: I think in some ways we use our platform to be educators. We just did the Fela Kuti shirts, in the same way we wanted to make Dead shirts. We want to turn people on to things that we feel are really important. And now that we have that community, it's so exciting to be able to spread these things that

p. 379: Online Ceramics shirt modeled by Coco
Photo: Justin Cole Smith

we find interesting or comforting or affirmative. So I think it's awesome that even if someone doesn't understand the message, it's innately going to seep into their existence. If you live with something long enough, it becomes part of you.

> BS: What role does this element of love or fandom play in Online Ceramics and bootlegging on a more general level?

EF: I think the reason Grateful Dead ephemera is so good, and the reason punk visual culture is so good, and the reason psychedelic posters were so good is that they were born from love and passion. Maybe that's why bootlegs, or the "unofficial" merch, is more exciting, because for the people that make it, their goal is to become a part of the community. That amount of passion driven into art is really hard to come by any other way. When you're inspired by something and you love it so much, you've got to channel that into the work you are making.

AR: I think it has something to do with mythology. Before getting into the music of the Grateful Dead, I was so interested in the idea of this band touring around and spreading LSD all over the world. These crazy stories of their manager making the LSD, and the acid tests, I found so compelling, and that really drew me in. I think bootlegs operate in a similar way, generating and spreading these larger-than-life stories...

EF: I grew up in a house where my stepdad had a room that was dedicated to the Grateful Dead. It had cookie jars and bear statues and throw blankets and

every bootleg. It was his stash, and I didn't enjoy it at the time, but looking back it deeply resonated with me. I remember looking through those books when I was seven or eight, and even though I was listening to Black Flag, the Dead artwork lured me in. The roses and the skeletons, I just found it all to be really cryptic and fascinating and it made me want to decipher it.

AR: The artwork around the Dead is unparalleled: from *Steal Your Face* to the Grateful Dead bears, and each has its own really amazing history. From the beginning, I always found the visual language around the band to be just as powerful as the music itself.

> BS: So much of the current bootleg trend is steeped in irony. How does humor or irony play into your work?

AR: There's a little bit of irony, but for the most part, we try to be pretty sincere. Humor is a huge part of what we do. But, as you mentioned earlier, we do really care about what we're saying and we think about it deeply. Since the beginning, we are pulling from influences that are rooted in some kind of positive idea. And sometimes we do get dark, like the satanic shirts, and that's where irony comes in for us.

EF: Amidst all of this, we are still trying to entertain ourselves and each other. We could capitalize on this movement and just make shirts that would sell. But the reason it reads so well is, Alix and I have been friends for twelve years now and people that work with us have been our friends for twelve years, and we all have a very similar sense of humor. We know that

what clicks with us generally will work beyond our scope—and if it doesn't, at least we'll find it funny.

> BS: I do feel there is a certain bootleg aesthetic that Online Ceramics tapped into early on. It feels like an important aspect of this is a desire to communicate a sense of history. That this object or graphic has undergone certain processes which communicate the effect of time. Why do you think our culture feels drawn to visuals that feel so removed from the present moment?

EF: We say the word "classic" a lot, and I think one of my main functions as a designer is to make work that's never dated. As in, it can't really be placed in a specific moment in history. I've gathered a lot of that concept from the Grateful Dead, because their lyrics never really point to a specific moment in history. I read this interview about one of their songs that said "styrofoam" in it and someone got really mad because that's such a marker of time. And I think we, for the most part, try and create in a similar way. Today everyone is making shirts with graphics all over them, sleeve graphics are very 2020, and once we realized that, we stopped doing them.

> BS: Given the proliferation of bootleg T-shirts in almost every area of culture, do you see the act as a trend with an expiration date, or a creative gesture that will evolve and prevail?

EF: I think it depends on what sphere you're looking at. Bootlegging is so vast. So you have something like

a Redbubble or Zazzle bootleg, which feels truly embedded in capitalism. But then you have people like Total Luxury Spa, and what they are doing has a true integrity and beauty to it. I got back to why I started making bootleg Scandinavian hardcore shirts as a way to spread the message of this thing I was really excited about. So I think the relevancy and power of bootlegging just kind of depends on each particular person's approach.

AR: I also think the ease of reproduction is really empowering. Any kid can save up like a hundred bucks and get all the stuff they need to do screen printing. This current generation is so creative, and bootlegging just feels like a powerful outlet for that creativity.

EF: Bootlegging feels like a natural expression of fandom, even before you might recognize what you're doing as bootlegging.

AR: I think bootlegging will always be alive and well.

Title page (p. 370): America Online logo flip taken from an Online Ceramics T-Shirt